

THE NATURE AND PROPER USES OF REASON
According to the Greek Orthodox Tradition

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The Fathers of the Greek Orthodox Church, basing themselves on the Holy Scriptures, on the oral and written Christian traditions, and on their own experience, which was the fruit of a life ordered in strict accordance with the precepts of Christ, have made many extremely illuminating and helpful statements regarding the nature and proper uses of human reason. Their teaching on

this important subject is, for the most part, unknown today, except for a very small number of persons. In this study, I shall undertake to give a partial outline of this teaching by collating some of the relevant statements scattered in the works of the Greek Fathers. I shall make special reference to the great ascetic-mystical Fathers, because they have given much attention to the question of the nature of human reason and its place in the Christian way of life. Their works contain many important ideas on this subject, and provide instruction which is of great value for those who are interested in the problem of how one can grow spiritually, of how one can become a Christian in fact and not merely in name.

Man, according to the Greek Fathers, is a dual being, consisting of soul (ψυχή) and body (σώμα), of an inner man (εσω άνθρωπος) and an outer man (έξω άνθρωπος). The soul has various distinct members, parts, or powers, just as the body has. The soul is constituted of the mind or reason, of the heart, of conscience, of the will. The terms the Greek Fathers use to designate the rational part are intellect (διάνοια), rational power (το λογιστικόν), mind (νοῦς). Most often they use the last term. Within the rational part they distinguish two parts or functions: the intuitive and the discursive. They sometimes use the term νοῦς or the term διάνοια in a broad sense which includes both functions ; sometimes they use the terms νοῦς and διάνοια in a narrow sense, the first to refer to the intuitive function, and the second to refer to the discursive function. They also use the terms λόγος, λογισμοί, etc., to refer to the latter.

The division of the human soul just given is to be found in the Gospels and in the Epistles of St. Paul; so are the related terms which the Greek Fathers use, with some exceptions. Christ recognized the "heart" and reason as two distinct and important powers or faculties in man, when He formulated what He called "the great and first commandment" as follows: "You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matt. 22.37; Mark 12. 29-30; Luke 10.27). He tells us here that we should love God with both our heart and our reason. In the original, Greek text of the Gospels, the word which in the English version is translated by "mind" is διάνοια, which is also translatable by the words reason or intellect. Luke employs the term νοῦς, and connects it with συνεσις, understanding. He says that Christ opened the minds (νοῦς) of His disciples to understand (συνιέναι) the Scriptures (24. 46). The Apostle Paul often uses the term (νοῦς), which is translated in the English versions of his Epistles by the word "mind". In Titus 1. 15, he says that the "very mind and conscience of the corrupt and unbelieving are corrupted." In another Epistle he sharply distinguishes νοῦς from the body. He says: "I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7. 22-24). And elsewhere he distinguishes νοῦς from πνεύμα, spirit. He says, "I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the mind also; I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also" (1 Cor. 14. 15). There! are numerous references to the "heart" (καρδία) throughout the New Testament,

and a good number of references to the "will" (θέλημα) Luke 22. 42; John 5. 30, 6. 38; etc.). The term "conscience" (συνείδησις) appears frequently in the Epistles of Paul.

The term το λογιστικόν, which is sometimes used by certain of the Fathers, is taken from the Greek philosophers, in particular from Plato and the Platonists. It is used by them as a synonym of mind in the broad sense of the term. Those who use the term το λογιστικόν, e.g. St. Gregory of Nyssa, Hesychios of Jerusalem, St. Symeon the New Theologian, St. Gregory of Sinai, and others, generally make use also of two other terms that Plato used to designate the other two parts into which he divided the human soul: το θυμικόν or θυμός, i.e. the excitable power, and το εταθυμητικόν or επιθυμία, i.e. the desiring power. However, they do not adhere slavishly to this schema; they use it occasionally, when it provides a convenient means of expounding some of their ethical ideas, but otherwise employ the scriptural distinctions and terms.

The teaching of the Greek Fathers regarding the actual state of human reason is profoundly affected by the Biblical idea of the Fall: man is not what he ought to be, and this applies to his reason as well as to his other faculties. Philosophers, especially in modern times, have proceeded on the assumption that human reason is in a natural, normal state, and that all that is needed in order that a man may discover the truth through his reason is to make systematic, methodic use of it. This assumption, however, has been contradicted by the fact that different philosophers, e.g. Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, et al., employing this same faculty, in accordance with the same method, have come out with very different views. The Greek Fathers regard the so-called "natural reason" of which philosophers speak and which they employ as their instrument for the discovery of truth, as being in a very unnatural state, and hence as being a very incompetent instrument. They assert that, as a result of transgression, human reason has become impure, darkened, incapable of perceiving higher truths, of contemplating God. 'Originally,' says St. Macarios the Great, "reason (νοῦς) being in a pure state, beheld the Lord in His glory; but now, as a result of the Fall, it is in a state of shame . . ." (Ὁμιλῖαι πνευματικαί, XLV, ed. Soterios N. Schoinas, 1954). And St. Symeon the New Theologian says: "The devil and his demons, having succeeded in making man an exile from Paradise and from God, through transgression, acquired the freedom to agitate the rational power (το λογιστικόν) of every man by day and by night through mental influence; sometimes much, sometimes a little, and sometimes a great deal" (Quoted by Nicephoros the Solitary in «Λόγος περί νήψεως και φυλακῆς καρδίας», Migne, Patrologia Graeca, Vol. 147. pp. 959A-960A).

Connected with the idea that man's reason is in a fallen, unnatural state, is the idea that it can return to its original, natural state. St. Macarios the Great remarks: "As the visible eye, being pure sees the sun clearly, so reason (νοῦς), having been perfectly purified always sees the glory of the light of Christ and is with the Lord day and night" (op. cit., XVII). And St. Gregory of Sinai says: "For a man to be rational (λογικός), or to become such according to nature (κατά φύσιν), as man had been (in the beginning), is impossible, unless one has first been purified and

become passionless" («Λόγοι διάφοροι περί εντολών, δογμάτων, απειλών» κλπ., Migne, 150, 1240A). "Those," he goes on to say, "who are rational according to nature (οἱ κατὰ φύσιν λογικοί), are those who have become saints (άγιοι) through purity" (ibid.). And further on, he says: "When it becomes purified and returns to its original status, the mind (νοῦς) looks up to God and receives Divine knowledge from Him. Instead of a book, it has the Spirit, instead of a pen, the intellect (διάνοια) and tongue,. . . instead of ink, light" (ibid., 1245D).

The Patristic idea that man's rational faculty is in a fallen, unnatural state, and is in need of being purified, regenerated, is to be found in the New Testament. That men are under the influence of evil, demonic forces, is a commonplace in the Gospels, in the Epistles of Paul, etc. That men's minds are in need of a radical change, is also a frequently recurring idea in the New Testament. St. John the Baptist, Christ, St. Paul call upon men to "transform their minds" - - μετανοεῖν. The words μετανοεῖν and μετάνοια are translated in the English versions by "to repent" and "repentance", respectively; but they have a richer, deeper meaning. Μετανοεῖν is derived from μετά and νοεῖν, which is the verb form of νοῦς; it means to change one's thinking, one's thoughts, one's ideas, one's values, one's whole mind. We are repeatedly shown in the Gospels that ordinarily, the human mind is closed to spiritual reality, is incapable of perceiving spiritual truths. Christ often reproaches His disciples for their failure to understand His teachings. He says "How is it that you fail to understand . . . ? (πῶς οὐ νοεῖτε;)" (Matt. 16. 11). "Are you still without understanding (ασύνετοι)? Do you not understand . . . ? (οὐ νοεῖτε;)" (Matt. 15. 16). Luke reports that after His resurrection, Christ "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (24. 46). Up to that time, the eyes of their minds were more or less closed. St. Paul asserts that in the case of the corrupt and unbelieving, "their very minds and consciences are corrupted" (Titus 1. 15-16). He stresses the need of purifying, regenerating the whole man, including the rational faculty, through faith and the observance of Christ's commandments. He exhorts men to "be transformed by the renewal (ἀνακαίνωσις) of the mind (νοῦς)." (Rom. 12. 2). The problem of how the rational faculty may be restored to its pristine, natural state, of how it may, in St. Paul's words, "be renewed," has received a great deal of attention by the Eastern Fathers.

The problem, as they see it, is to be solved by an integral approach, which seeks to regenerate the whole man. The Christian way begins with faith (πίστις). One must have faith in the person of Jesus Christ, in His teachings. One must receive the divine teachings of Christ in one's heart and allow it, instead of some philosophy or other merely human teaching to become the rule of one's life. The seat of faith is the heart: man believes with his heart (cf. Rom. 10. 8-10). The heart is the soil which receives the seeds of faith and in which, according to its state, faith grows and brings forth fruit, or fails to do so (cf. Luke 8. 12, 15. 24-25). The Christian begins with faith and he proceeds by faith. But the more strictly he lives by faith, the more he keeps all the Divine Commandments, the more he rises above faith to illumination, to spiritual insight, to the direct perception of spiritual reality. For the reception of Christ's teaching in our hearts, and life in constant conformity to this teaching, purifies the whole man, the mind as well as the heart.

The Greek Fathers frequently quote and comment on Christ's statement: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5. 8). God can only be seen by a pure mind dwelling in a pure heart. The mind has the possibility of seeing God when, having purified itself from fantasies, useless thoughts and passions, it descends into the heart, guards the heart against everything that defiles it, and joins it in prayer. This possibility becomes an actuality when one becomes a recipient of Divine grace.

In order to become pure in heart and in mind, in conscience and in will, one must live by his faith, one must apply the teaching which he has received in his heart; and this involves certain uses of the rational faculty. The mere passive reception of Christ's teaching is not enough: "Faith without 'works' (ἔργα) is barren" (James 2. 20). By the term "works" the Greek Fathers do not understand merely charitable acts, but all the inner and outer acts of man, in so far as these are manifestations of genuine faith. Faith for them is a kind of working, of doing. Faith is conceived and defined by them dynamically, not statically. This is seen very strikingly in the opening paragraphs of the Practical and Theological Precepts of St. Symeon the New Theologian. "Faith," he says, "is to die for Christ's sake, for His commandments; and to regard such death as leading to life" («Κεφάλαια πρακτικά και θεολογικά», Migne 120, 604A-605A). Again, he says, "Faith in Christ is not merely to despise the pleasures of life, but also to endure patiently all temptations, griefs, sorrows, misfortunes, until God wills to bestow His grace upon us" (Ibid. 605A). And so on. Callistos, Patriarch of Constantinople, and the monk Ignatios, his friend, agree with St. Máximos the Confessor that: "He who acts, reveals by his actions the measure of his faith . . . ; while he who does not act, reveals by his lack of action the measure of his lack of faith . . ." («Μέθοδος και κανόν», Migne, 147, 709A). Now acting in accordance with faith, applying Christ's precepts in all our activities, inner as well as outer, which constitutes full-fledged faith, and leads to the purification of the whole man, necessitates certain uses of our rational faculty. The mind must take an active, leading role. What this role is, we shall now see, as we examine the various functions of the mind.

The Greek Fathers attribute a variety of important functions to the rational faculty of man: contemplation (θεωρία), prayer (προσευχή), attention (προσοχή, νή-ψις), reasoning. Hence, they regard it as the leading faculty of man. Thus, St. Macarios calls \oũς the ruler (ἡγεμόν) of man (op. cit., XX), the charioteer (ηνίοχος) of the chariot of the soul (ibid., XL; cf. I), the governor (κυβερνήτης) of the heart (ibid. XV). And St. Gregory of Nyssa says: the mind (νοῦς) is "the master and steward of our tabernacle; it ought to arrange all things within us well, and to use each one of the faculties of the soul, which the Creator has fashioned to be our instruments and implements, skillfully and for good ends" («Περί παρθενίας», ed. J. P. Cavarinos, Gregorii Nysseni Opera Ascetica, VHP, 317-318). And Hesychios of Jerusalem says that "the rational power" (το λογικόν) must be placed over the other two (parts of the soul - - the excitable and the

desiring) as their master, to keep them in order with wisdom and knowledge" («Προς Θεόδουλον λόγος ψυχοφελής περί Νήψεως καὶ Ἀρετῆς», Migne, 93, 1520A).

Contemplation is the intuitive, direct perception of higher truths by the mind. In its highest form, it is the vision of God. The mystical Fathers, e.g. St. Macarios the Great, St. John Chinacos (or St. John of the Ladder), St. Isaac the Syrian, St. Symeon the New Theologian, and many others teach that the contemplation of God is possible even in this life. But they indicate that this is possible only to those who have achieved purity of mind and heart.

Such purity is to be achieved chiefly by attention and prayer. These two practices, in order to be effective, must proceed together, in the heart. This is something the ascetic-mystical Fathers emphatically teach. The heart, they point out, is ordinarily full of fantasies, worldly thoughts, vain thoughts, evil thoughts, and passions. These render the heart impure (cf. Matt. 15. 18-20), make illumination, contemplation impossible. It is necessary that they be opposed and eliminated. A pure heart is a heart which has been freed from them. This freedom is to be attained through attention, prayer, and the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Christ often exhorted His disciples: "be attentive" (προσέχετε), "be awake and pray" (γρηγορείτε καὶ προσεύχεσθε)." Similarly, the Greek Fathers insist on the need of constant attention, vigilance, or wakefulness, and prayer. Their writings are rich in instructions on how to cultivate these activities of the mind. We must constantly guard our heart seeing that no evil and vain thoughts, fantasies, or passions enter it. Through attention, we must bar the way to their entrance, must not allow the heart to accept them, to attach itself to them, to identify itself with them. "The mind (νοῦς)," says St. Symeon the New Theologian, "should guard the heart when it is praying" («Περὶ τῶν τριῶν τρόπων τῆς προσευχῆς λόγος», Migne 120, 705C). Similarly, the monks Callistos and Ignatios say: "Prayer is true and free from wandering when the mind (νοῦς) guards the heart during prayer" («Μέθοδος καὶ κανὼν», Migne, 147, 740C). And Hesychios says: "The work of wisdom is to incite our rational power (το λογιστικόν) to strict and continual wakefulness (νήψις) and to spiritual contemplation" («Προς Θεόδουλον λόγος ψυχοφελής περί Νήψεως καὶ Ἀρετῆς», Migne, 93 1492C).

Though the Eastern Fathers consider inner attention or vigilance as a necessary condition for purifying the heart, they do not consider it as a sufficient condition. Here they differ sharply from the philosophers, who have either, like David Hume, greatly disparaged reason, holding that it "is and ought to be the slave of the passions," or else, like Socrates, have exaggerated its efficacy as a moral force, holding that it can by itself master the passions and other undesirable elements in man. The Greek Fathers hold that the rational power of man can and ought to oppose wrong thoughts, passions and fantasies, wage war against them by means of mental vigilance or attention, but they see that this opposition, this inner war, cannot overcome and destroy them, but only neutralize them. Reason with its vigilance on the one hand, and passions, thoughts, and fantasies on the other, constitute equilibrium, balancing forces (ισόρροποι δυνάμεις). (Macarios, op

cit., XXVII). A third force is necessary to enable reason to overcome, to destroy them—God. Hence the need of prayer, in which we invoke God's aid. St. Macarios remarks: "Mind is a rival (αντίπαλος) force, it has a balancing power in relation to sin, of contradicting and opposing thoughts. . . But without God it can not gain victory over evil or uproot it (ibid.). Similarly, Hesychios rejects the idea of the sufficiency of human reason as a moral force, and stresses the necessity of prayer. "As long," he says, "as you call on Jesus Christ against the spirits of evil, it (reason) easily drives them away. . ." "But whenever it foolishly trusts wholly to itself, like the bird called swift-winged, it is shaken up and confounded" («Προς Θεόδουλον λόγος» κλπ., Migne, 93, 1488C). Again, he remarks: "It is impossible to purify our heart from passionate thoughts, and to drive our mental enemies out of it without constant calling on Jesus" (ibid., 1488D-1489A). And St. Symeon the New Theologian makes the following masterly statement on these two important practices—attention and prayer, indicating that, in order to be effective, attention and prayer require one another. "Attention (προσοχή)," he says, "should be linked to prayer as inseparably as the body is linked to the soul. . . Attention should proceed forward, spying out the enemies, like a scout; and it should be the first to wage war against sin, and to oppose the evil thoughts which enter the soul. And after attention should come prayer, which banishes and destroys at once all those evil thoughts, which attention earlier had combatted; for by itself alone, attention cannot destroy them " («Περί των τριών τρόπων της προσευχής λόγος», Migne, 120, 701B-C). The prayer which the Fathers especially recommend in this connection is the following: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me!"

Attention and prayer, to be effective, must be in the heart: the mind must descend into the heart 1 , guard the heart by means of attention and join it in prayer. Attention is by the mind; prayer must be by both the mind and the heart. Thus, Theoleptos, Metropolitan of Philadelphia, says: "Now look at the method of rational prayer (κατά διάνοιαν προσευχή). Converse (inner speech) destroys passionate thoughts; the turning of the mind (νοῦς) towards God banishes worldly thoughts; contrition of the soul (i.e. heart) stops carnal love. It can be seen then that prayer which consists of an unceasing invocation of the Divine Name is a harmony and union of mind, word, and soul (i.e. heart). «Λόγος την εν Χριστῷ κρυπτὴν ἐργασίαν διασαφώ», Migne, 143, 392D-393A; cf. 393B). And St. Gregory of Sinai quotes approvingly the remark of the Apostle Paul: "I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the mind also," and of St. John Climacos: "The great doer of the great and perfect prayer says this: 'I want to say five words with my mind'" (Περί ησυχίας καὶ περὶ των δυο τρόπων της προσευχής», Migne, 150, 1320B).

Contemplation, prayer, attention - - these are the uses of the rational power that the Eastern Fathers stress and value. They play down its discursive activity. The activity of discursive reason, which proceeds by analysis, deduction, induction, moving from thoughts to thoughts or from sensory things to thoughts and vice versa, should be greatly circumscribed. This activity should be restricted, so far as possible, to drawing out the implications of the truths of Scripture, to showing the applications of such truths, which (truths) are known through faith, or are

apprehended directly, intuitively by the illumined mind. Beyond this, the activity of discursive reason is a hindrance to the Christian, especially to one who is striving for spiritual perfection. For it distracts one from the important tasks of attention and prayer, and makes illumination and contemplation impossible. Pure prayer, illumination, contemplation require the purification, the stilling (ησυχία) of both the mind and the heart - - the suppression and elimination not only of passions and fantasies, but even of thoughts, especially of evil, worldly, useless thoughts. True prayer is in the heart. True prayer is in the heart; it is there that the mind is illumined and apprehends God. But a necessary condition for the descent of the mind into the heart is the suspension of the activity of discursive reason. Thus, Callistos and Ignatios say: "The mind does not descend within (the heart) without first relinquishing every thought, and becoming single and naked, freed from all memories, except that of invoking our Lord Jesus Christ" («Μέθοδος και κανών», Migne, 147, 681A). And Theoleptos says, "God the Logos, invoked by name during prayer, takes out discursive reason (του νου νόησις) like a rib, and bestows knowledge" («Λόγος την εν Χριστῳ κρυπτὴν ἐργασίαν διασαφόν», Migne, 143, 401B). The highest activity of the mind, the direct apprehension of God, requires the elimination of all thoughts. God is above thought, and hence he who is to contemplate God, to become united with Him, must rise above thoughts, as well as above passions and fantasies. The mobile mind, discursive reason, must become motionless, unthinking, without thoughts. Then the immobile, intuitive mind, guarding and purifying the heart by means of attention and prayer, has the possibility of being illumined and of contemplating Him Who is above all thought.

1. The mind is conceived as having its center of gravity, so to speak, in the head; the heart, in the region of the physical heart.

Source: Greek Orthodox Theological Review, Vol. 1, No. 1, August 1954, pp. 30-37.